

**Yom Kippur 5779 – Yizkor Sermon
Honoring Those Who Came Before Us,
Guiding Those Who Come After Us
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Good Yantiv.

Oh the joys that young people will never know!

I could say a lot of different things right now, but I'm talking about something serious.

Young people have no idea what a "Cliff Hanger" is. When I say "Cliff Hanger," I mean a TV series Cliff hanger.

Today, everyone binge watches shows—watching 1, 2, or 5 seasons in a few sittings. Or they watch anything at any time on demand.

For those of you under the age of about 40, let me tell you what a cliff hanger is. It's a technique the writers of TV shows used to use. A TV show would end at a very dramatic moment—you, the viewer were dying to know what happened, and you had to wait a whole week, until the show was on again, to find out.

What's the most famous cliffhanger of all time? Probably "Who Shot JR?" on the show "Dallas."

Cliffhangers were great, but they were also cruel and unusual punishment.

Anyway, I am thinking about cliffhangers, because I should have left you with a cliffhanger at the end of my sermon last night. In my sermon, this morning, I am picking up right where I left off.

Last night, I spoke about how Moses at first refused, and then accepted his imminent death. In the midrash—a rabbinic story—that I shared, Moses dies at the end.

This morning, I'm picking up with: What happened after Moses died? The Torah gives us an answer, but it's mysterious. I'm calling it a biblical riddle, and in my sermon today, I'm in search of some answers to this riddle.

What's the riddle? At the end of the Torah, it says, "God buried Moses in the valley in the land of Moav [just east of the Jordan River]" (Deuteronomy 34:6). Why did God

bury Moses -- and not Moses' family, or Moses' successor—Joshua, or even a group of Elders from the Children of Israel?

This riddle—Why did God bury Moses—becomes even greater, when we see that Moses was the only person in the Tanach (the Bible) to be afforded this act of divine love.

The first answer that I found to this question has to do with the fact that making sure someone has a proper burial is considered a great act of *chesed*—lovingkindness. Our Sages put it in the highest category of *chesed* —calling it an act of *chesed shel emet*, which means, “lovingkindness of truth.” The reason it’s placed in the highest category is – if we do an act of loving-kindness for someone while they are still alive, and we don’t want them to pay us back—they still **might** pay us back. But when we do an act of lovingkindness for someone who has died—we know they can’t pay us back—and we are doing it purely out of love.

When someone dies, their soul leaves their body. Our tradition tells us that burying the body is considered an act of dignity and love—it enables the body to return to the earth. That’s why Jews come together at a funeral, and participate in the mitzvah of burying the dead. Participating in this mitzvah is considered an act of *chesed shel emet*—doing a deed of lovingkindness for someone who cannot pay us back.

Perhaps God buries Moses then – and not Joshua or the Israelites – because it is one of the last actions in the Torah, and God was making a statement about the central message of Torah. This is how one of the Talmudic rabbis—Rabbi Simlai—understood the story. He says, “The Torah begins with deeds of lovingkindness and ends with deeds of lovingkindness. It begins with deeds of lovingkindness, as it is written, “And God made garments for Adam and Eve and clothed them,” (Genesis 3:21). The Torah also ends with deeds of lovingkindness, as it is written, “And God buried Moses in the valley in the land of Moav.”

According to Rabbi Simlai, since the Torah begins and ends with deeds of lovingkindness, the Torah is telling us that its central message is that there is nothing greater than doing deeds of lovingkindness. Just as God does deeds of lovingkindness, so too should we strive to fill our days, by doing these kind and loving deeds.

Another answer to this question: Why did God bury Moses? –is probably the most common answer that’s given.

The answer actually comes from the Torah itself. The verse which says, “God buried Moses in the valley in the land of Moav . . .” ends with the words, “**and no one knows his burial place to this day.**” Accordingly, the commentators tell us, God buried Moses

specifically so that no one would know where his grave site is located. This would then ensure that the Israelites would **NOT** turn Moses' grave into a shrine, and that they would not pray to Moses instead of God.

A third reason that God buried Moses is that God was acting with Moses in a way that was "measure for measure"—or in Hebrew, "*Midah k'negged midah*." How was it measure for measure? While Moses filled his life serving God, one of his greatest acts of *chesed*—of lovingkindness—was done on behalf of Joseph.

To understand this—we must go to the very end of the book of Genesis. Just before Joseph dies, he calls his family together and makes them take an oath. He says to them, "When God has taken notice of you, [and brings you out of the land of Egypt], you shall carry up my bones from here," (Genesis 50:25).

Fast forward 430 years, to a few days before the Israelites were to leave Egypt. The Israelites knew they would be leaving. Can you imagine all of the activity, the celebration and excitement?

According to a midrash, (*Deuteronomy Rabbah*, 11:7) God goes down to Egypt in those days, to check on the Israelites. When God arrives, God sees that the Israelites are not packing, instead they are all occupied with gathering silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbors. Which was what God told the Israelites to do. Everyone was doing this. Everyone, that is, except for Moses.

What was Moses doing?

He was going around the city, and for three days and three nights, he was laboring to find Joseph's coffin. After Moses had tired himself out, a woman named Serah, approached him. In the midrash, Serah is a mythic figure—a wise woman, who has the accumulated knowledge of many centuries.

"Serah observed that Moses was wiped out from his efforts and said to him: 'My lord Moses, why are you so tired?' He replied: 'For three days and three nights I have been going around the city looking for Joseph's coffin, and I cannot find it.'"

She said: 'Come with me and I will show you where it is.' She took him to the Nile River and said to him: 'In this place, the [Egyptian] magicians and astrologers made Joseph a coffin that was extra-ordinarily heavy, and then cast into the river, and thus they said to Pharaoh: 'If it is your wish that this people should never leave this place, then as long as they will not find the bones of Joseph, they be unable to leave.'"

“Immediately Moses placed himself by the bank of the river and called out: ‘Joseph, Joseph, you know how you obligated Israel [with your oath] . . . Joseph give honor to the God of Israel, and do not hold up the redemption. You have good deeds to your credit, intercede then with your Creator and come up from the depths.’ As soon as Moses finished his plea, Joseph’s coffin began to break through the water, and to rise from the depths like a stick [floating on the water].”

“Moses took it and placed it upon his shoulder and carried it, and all of Israel followed him. And while Israel carried the silver and gold which they had taken out of Egypt, Moses was carrying Joseph’s coffin.”

“God said to him: ‘Moses you say that you have done a small thing; by your life, this act of kindness is a great thing; since you ignored silver and gold—to busy yourself with giving Joseph a proper burial. I too will do this kindness to you, in that I will busy Myself with your burial.’”

Another beautiful and moving midrash.

Moses not only enabled Joseph to have a proper burial in the Land of Canaan, but he also honored Joseph’s dying wishes. Honoring the wishes of someone after they die, is very important. Most of the time, the mourners, family, and friends are willing to do whatever they can to honor the specific wishes of a loved one who has died. That might include, being buried in a specific place, having a particular rabbi or cantor, making sure that certain people speak at the funeral service, and/or asking that specific prayers, songs, or poems are recited.

Arranging the funeral and shiva a certain way, according to a deceased person’s wishes is one thing, but what about honoring a deceased person’s wishes regarding our actions in the world/regarding how we live?

If we already live in a way which is aligned to the deceased person’s values—if we live in a way, in which our loved one was proud of how we were living—then it is easy to continue living in the same way. However, we still might be able to make some changes in our lives, which honor our loved one who has died. Some examples include, supporting charities that were important to them, including family members and friends who were important to them in future family gatherings, and regularly doing a specific mitzvah, which was meaningful to them.

For a long time, my mom—Marilyn Mishkin, of blessed memory—probably never thought I would be a rabbi. And she never asked me to consider being a rabbi.

However, when I told her that I wanted to be a rabbi – I think it was a moment of great joy and meaning for her.

For my mom, Judaism, the synagogue, and the State of Israel were central pillars in her life. I feel very fortunate to be a rabbi – not only because I get great meaning from it, but also because I feel like it gives great honor to my mother.

All of that being said, there are some specific ways that I try to honor my mother's legacy. The mitzvah of *Hachnasat Orchim*, welcoming guests, has an added meaning to me, because it was the core mitzvah of my mother's life.

In addition, while I love Israel and there are many Israeli organizations and causes that I support, my greatest love is for Hadassah, because it was so important to my mother.

Kibud Av v'Em—honoring your father and mother, doesn't end when they die.

Kavod Habriyot—honoring other people – that too doesn't end when those people die.

How much we incorporate the values of our loved ones into how we live our lives speaks volumes about the honor that we give them, or deny them.

This does not mean that we do everything they would want us to. For a variety of reasons, we may not be able to, or we may not want to.

For example, a common wish that parents have when they die, is that their children and their children's families remain close. For some families, this is very easy, it's second nature. . . . But not for all families.

If there is a rift in a family—extra efforts should be made toward reconciliation, in memory of a parent. However, sometimes the rift is too great and it just can't happen. That being said, attempts at reconciliation can be tried again and again, in the future.

What if a deceased relative or friend was more religious than we are and wanted us to be more involved Jewishly?

It's easy to rationalize the decision to not make any changes in our lives vis-à-vis Judaism. We could say that they had a more religious upbringing than us. We could say they were more religious than us. Or that they believed in God, and we struggle with God, or don't believe in God. And the reasons can go on and on.

But—again—we should make extra efforts, in their memory, to find meanings and connections that work for us.

This reminds me of the teaching, which opens, by asking:

Why at the beginning of the Amidah prayer, does it say, “*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu, v’Elohei Avoteinu: Elohei Avraham, Elohei Yitzchak, v’Eloehi Yaakov, Elohei Sarah, Elohei Rivkah, Elohei Rachel, v’Elohei Leah.*”

In English this means: “Blessed are You Lord, our God and God of our ancestors: The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of Sarah, the God of Rebecca, the God of Rachel, and the God of Leah.”

Very easily, the prayer could have just said, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah” – It’s all the same God! But, instead, it chooses to be verbose—saying, the **God** of Abraham, the **God** of Isaac, the **God** of Jacob, etc?

Martin Buber provides an answer to this question, saying: Yes, it is all the same God; however, the words indicate that each of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs had to find their own honest and authentic connection to God. It says, the **God** of Abraham, the **God** of Isaac, and the **God** of Jacob—because each one developed his **own** relationship to God. And did not just adopt his parents’ relationship to God.

Many of us do a lot in our lives to honor our loved ones who have died. And some of us don’t do as much. But either way—whether we do a lot or a little—we should ask ourselves: Could I, and should I, be doing more? For some of us, one reason we don’t do more, is that our loved ones never directly told us what they wanted us to do, or they told us some things, but not everything, that they would like us to do.

To prevent that from happening to us—we should create a record of what’s most important to us. This type of record is sometimes called an Ethical Will.

An ethical will is a document, video, or audio recording, in which we articulate the things that are most important to us—like our values, life lessons, rituals, and people.

Creating an Ethical Will is a long-standing practice in Judaism, going back to the time of the Bible.

Rabbi Jack Riemer and Dr. Nathaniel Stampfer published a book on Ethical Wills, entitled, *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them*. In the book, they share their accumulated wisdom which they acquired—over many years—by teaching classes on how to read, and write, ethical wills.

Rabbi Riemer explains that an Ethical Will has great benefits not only for the recipients, but also for the author. He says, “I have learned that when you write such a will you learn a great deal about yourself in the process,” which makes a lot of sense, because in writing an Ethical Will, we reflect on the central questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives.

And what about the “*L’Dor Va’dor* Principle” – passing on our tradition and our wisdom to the next generation? Do our children know what’s most important to us? Some may know and some may not know, depending on how clear we are, and how often we speak about these things. But even if we’ve been clear, it’s very powerful to articulate the values that inspire us, and have given our lives meaning, and to share the most important life lessons that we’ve learned. Sharing our deepest values and life lessons is all the more powerful, when it’s put in the context of a loving message, which says, “This is what I want to share with you, in the hopes that it will provide you with a little extra wisdom about life.

Let’s not wait until we are dying to write an ethical will. Instead—in the near future—let each of us write an Ethical Will, or call it something else, if you like, an ethical letter, or a statement of our values – and share it immediately with our loved ones. This will enable us to share with others what is important to us, it can initiate important conversations, and it may have an impact on how our loved ones think about their lives.

We should all engage in writing ethical letters and/or ethical wills. We don’t need to be a great writer to do it—we just have to do it with authenticity and care. As our Sages say, “Words that come from the heart, enter the heart.”

To help encourage you to write a statement of values or an ethical will, I will provide a document to the congregation with suggestions for how to get started, and list different subject matters for you to think about.

I want to finish where I began: Why did God bury Moses?

I have one more answer.

This answer follows an earlier answer—that it had to do with not knowing where Moses’ was buried. But this answer is not concerned with the Israelites building a shrine to honor Moses. Instead, it says that Moses’ death, and hidden burial are symbolic-- representing the potential that every person has.

In not knowing where Moses is buried, in some ways, it feels more like he is still alive. And the fact is, that in many important ways, Moses is still alive. Every time we open a *Chumash* [a book of the Torah], Moses is alive in the text of the Torah. And when we study Torah, we encounter Moses' legacy of Torah.

With this understanding, the Torah in general, and Deuteronomy, in particular, are not only a means to convey the will of God, but also—at the same time—they serve as Moses' ethical will for us.

What is true for Moses, is true for us too. When we die—in some significant ways – we will still be alive. Our spirit, love, teachings, and *ma'asim tovim* (good deeds) will live on, and continue to affect the world for good.

In addition to our spirit, love, teachings, and good deeds, may we also leave a record of the values and lessons that are most important to us. By doing so, we will bestow a great blessing on our loved ones and on future generations.

And let us say: Amen.